

Making sense of six Chinas

JUNE 26, 2012



In concluding his elegant book [*On China*](#), Henry Kissinger describes an ongoing debate within Chinese leadership circles. Some of its ruling class believes China should maintain its "peaceful development" strategy in accordance with a rules-based international order, while others demand that China now adopt a more aggressive posture that directly challenges American primacy. I've just returned from a month in China and experienced some of this debate firsthand. Visits to several cities, and meetings and conversations with Chinese officials, scholars, foreign business leaders, American officials and, yes, taxi drivers produce an amalgam of impressions.

The best way to make sense of the current state of affairs in China is to think of not one but several "Chinas" -- each is real, but none by itself is the full reality. The following are six of the "Chinas" that exist today; the question is which of these will command the future.

Rising Power: Chinese leaders are obsessed with their nation's rise, and see it reclaiming its historic position as a dominant world power. Many Chinese strategists also believe the U.S. is in decline. But their opinion splits on what this means. Those who see the U.S. primarily as an adversary (see below) welcome America's declension, while those who see the U.S. more as a partner in China's rise worry about the consequences of a diminished U.S. Several Chinese thinkers expressed their frustration with what they see as erratic American policy under the Obama administration, which has veered from the "G-2" embrace of 2009 to the now perceived hostility of the "pivot." Some Chinese interlocutors also pointed out the same fact that troubles many Americans: A White House pursuing massive defense cuts cannot adequately resource a bolstered posture in Asia.

Security Threat: The debate within the U.S. over whether or not China poses a threat often misses the Chinese perspective: many (though certainly not all) Chinese strategists see America as their principle adversary. The People's Liberation Army is operationalizing this attitude in its development of weapons platforms designed to counter the U.S. As I pointed out in a discussion with some Chinese scholars and officials, the standard American talking point demanding more "transparency" from China about its military modernization and expansion may be diplomatically requisite, but it elides the real issue. The U.S. does not merely want "transparency" from China; we want China to stop developing weapons directly [targeted against](#) American force projection capabilities -- if it doesn't intend to become our adversary.

Economic Dynamo: While China's growth is slowing and some of its numbers may be [contrived](#), its economic strength is real and its long-term trajectory still looks promising. Virtually all Chinese speak with tremendous pride about their nation's economic boom, which they have experienced firsthand in materially-improved lives. Many Chinese believe that their nation weathered the global economic crisis relatively unscathed, which in their minds vindicates their model and equips them to meet future challenges such as the transition from export reliance to domestic consumption. Massive infrastructure projects such as the many new airports and high speed rail may excessively dazzle some Western visitors, but this should not diminish the genuine accomplishment they represent. Nor have corruption, bureaucracy and stacked decks dissuaded many international investors from still hungering to grow their stakes in the China market.

Fragile Kleptocracy: My own Tom Friedman-esque moment of analysis-via-taxi-drivers came one evening when all of the Beijing taxi drivers in the central part of the city had turned off their

meters and were charging rates five times the metered rate for a ride back to our hotel. After some customary evasions, one of them admitted that this was their version of a work slowdown. Strikes are illegal, but the frustrations of Beijing taxi drivers, whose rates haven't been increased in ten years amidst surging expenses despite many pleas to the government, boiled over into illicit protest. Such resentments are multiplied across the country, crossing industries and rural and urban lines, resulting in tens of thousands of protests annually. Then there is the Bo Xilai case, which continues to reverberate, especially as Bo's fate is negotiated amidst maneuverings for the upcoming Party Congress and leadership transition. The Bo case is only exceptional in that it became public. Otherwise it is all too familiar in China, where corruption is pervasive, governance is brittle and a senior Party post commonly also includes control of a favored industry or company.

Reforming Autocracy: Yes, China remains a repressive autocracy, but nevertheless ongoing reforms and liberalizations are taking place, many enabled by communications technology that the government cannot entirely suppress. A major news story during my visit was the heinous forced abortion on a Chinese woman seven months' pregnant in Shaanxi province. Social networks in China [erupted](#) with popular outrage, as heartbreaking photos of the mother next to her dead baby circulated widely, and an embarrassed Chinese government responded by suspending the local officials responsible. This is a woefully deficient punishment, and the manifestly unjust one-child policy remains in force, despite China's looming demographic nightmare. But even a few years ago this crime would have never been disclosed at all, let alone prompted public protest and an official response.

Insecure Bully: Some revealing yet head-scratching moments came when Chinese interlocutors expressed their [consternation](#) at the U.S. Embassy Beijing's [Twitter feed](#) reporting on air quality in Beijing, while in the next breath they defended China's provocations such as its anti-satellite missile test, bellicose territorial claims on the South China Sea and support for North Korea. These are not the actions of a confident, responsible stakeholder, but of an insecure bully, obsessing over its international image while engaging in obnoxious behavior that does much more damage to its image than any American report on human rights or environmental quality. This insecurity also prevents China from coming to terms with its own history. While the Cultural Revolution is widely lamented, the Tiananmen Square massacre (whose 23rd anniversary passed with [censorship](#) even of the Shanghai Stock Exchange) cannot be mentioned, and Mao remains valorized. China's insecurities also help explain its foreign policies to shield the Syrian regime and Iranian nuclear program, and [prop up](#) the Kim dictatorship in North Korea -- all of these are short-sighted

decisions, but short-term thinking is a hallmark of an insecure government obsessed with maintaining its hold on power.

Some of the "Chinas" above are positive, others are negative. Yet in understanding China all of these variations must be taken into account. The U.S. has a major stake in encouraging political reform and economic growth while discouraging the internal repression and truculent behavior towards its neighbors. Mistakes in China policy come from privileging one scenario over all the others -- for example the "[China Fantasists](#)" who believe the growing economy will inevitably lead to a democratic, peaceful China, or the [offensive realists](#) who focus on the Chinese military threat while ignoring the economic benefits the U.S. receives in the relationship, let alone China's internal fragilities.

This is also why China policy is such a challenge. Taken together, the multiple realities of China today defy any simple historical analogies about the management of rising powers, and demand an unprecedented wholeness of vision from the United States.

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